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ABSTRACT

Gerontologists recognize that the family provides critical practical and affective support to the aged. While researchers have explored the burden experienced by children assisting elderly parents, much less attention has been given to the related issue of aged parents' reactions to receiving help from adult children. A study was conducted to identify characteristics of elderly parents' families and of the parents themselves which predicted satisfaction and concern regarding help from adult children. Participants were 205 noninstitutionalized older adults who described family structure, help exchanged with each child, satisfaction and concerns regarding help received from children, and familiy solidarity. Parents who evaluated their health positively and who expressed high levels of proximity and kin orientation values expressed greatest satisfaction with children's help. Parents who expressed high levels of kin obligation and low levels of kin orientation values and who evaluated their health negatively expressed greatest concern regarding children's help. Since variables indexing children's role demands were not significant predictors of parents' evaluations, role conflict apparently did not preclude satisfactory helping. (Author/NB)

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PREDICTING AGED PARENTS' EVALUATIONS OF CHILDREN'S HELP

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Abstract

This paper reports an NIA-funded study identifying characteristics of elderly parents' families and of the parents themselves which predicted satisfaction and concern regarding help from adult children. Participants described family structure, help exchanged with each child, satisfaction and concerns regarding help received from children, and familism values. Parents who evaluated their health positively and who expressed high levels of proximity and kin orientation values expressed greatest satisfaction with children's help. Parents who expressed high levels of kin obligation and low levels of kin orientation values and who evaluated their health negatively expressed greatest concern regarding children's help. Since variables indexing children's role demands were not significant predictors of parents' evaluations, role conflict apparently did not preclude satisfactory helping.

PREDICTING AGED PARENTS' EVALUATIONS OF CHILDREN'S HELP

Gerontologists recognize that the family provides critical practical and affective support to the aged. Investigators have described ways in which young and middle-aged adults assist older relatives, and the impact of this assistance upon the family. Recently, researchers and practitioners have turned their attention toward burden experienced by children assisting elderly parents.

There has been far less attention to the related issue of aged parents' reactions to receiving help from adult children. It is possible that receiving help, like providing help, entails stress. This paper explores that possibility; three research questions are considered. First, what types of concerns do elderly parents have regarding help that they receive from their adult children? Second, what characteristics predict levels of concern regarding help received from adult children? Third, what characteristics predict levels of satisfaction with help received from adult children? Identifying these predictors could help to plan interventions designed to enhance problematic patterns of family support; these data could also be useful in specifying which individuals and families could most benefit from interventions.

Researchers have described relationships between family structure and helping patterns. Some have found that when either the adult child (Cicerelli, 1983) or the elderly parent (Longino & Lipman, 1982) experienced marital disruption, the parent received less help. In another study, older parents who were childless or who had only one child received

more help from relatives other than children and from sources outside of the family than did parents who had two or more children (Cicerelli, 1981b).

Other gerontologists have investigated subjective reactions to family assistance. Findings describe several sources of stress related to helping elderly parents, including role conflict, financial strain, and fatigue (e.g., Brody, 1985; Cantor, 1983; Clark & Rakowski, 1983; Simos, 1973). Furthermore, caregiver characteristics -- such as gender, attitudes toward the family, perceived closeness to the care recipient (Cantor, 1983) -- are associated with levels of burden. Characteristics of helping patterns, such as frequency of providing help, are also associated with levels of burden (Cicirelli, 1981a).

Although researchers have identified family characteristics associated with helping patterns and strains experienced by providing help, important questions remain. Among these questions are characteristics associated with parents' concerns. Specifying these characteristics could help to identify older individuals who are dissatisfied with assistance received from their children and who might thus benefit from intervention.

As there has not been extensive prior research regarding older parents' evaluations of adult children's help, the present study was an exploratory project designed to provide both descriptions of common concerns and guidelines for continued investigation. In this study, elderly parents described 11 types of practical and affective support exchanged with each of their adult children, and evaluated the help that they received. Frequencies of specific concerns were tabulated, and characteristics

predicting levels of concern were identified. In addition, characteristics predicting levels of satisfaction with children's help were identified.

Earlier research describing aged parents' reactions to children's assistance suggested that participants would most often be concerned about burdening their children. Research on caregiver burden indicates that children providing help are commonly troubled by fatigue and role conflict; in the present study, it was expected that parents' concern and satisfaction levels would be predicted by indices of children's responsibilities which competed with helping parents (e.g., working outside of the home, helping other relatives). Pilot interviews further suggested that participants' familism values would predict concern and satisfaction levels (Thomas et al., 1985; 1986).

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and five (147 women, 58 men) noninstitutionalized residents of southeastern Wisconsin volunteered their participation. Ages ranged from 60 to 90; the mean age was 74.05. One hundred and five participants were between the ages of 60 and 74; the remaining 100 participants were aged 75-90. Participants were recruited through requests made at senior citizen's centers, nutrition sites, and meetings of church and civic organizations; through mailings to recipients of Meals on Wheels; and through chain sampling.

Participants' demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Approximately half were married, and most of the remaining participants

were widowed. Most (86%) were retired; approximately equal numbers had retired from white collar/professional, clerical, blue collar, and service occupations. Approximately two-thirds had completed some high school or a high school degree; nearly one-third had completed some college or a college degree. Nearly 40% had annual household incomes of less than $10,000; an additional 41% had annual household incomes of $10,001-$20,000. Approximately three-quarters rated their general health as excellent or good.

Insert Table 1 about here

Characteristics of participants' families are also summarized in Table 1. Participants had between one and seven children; the mean was two children. Children's ages ranged from 17 to 70; mean age of the youngest child was 41.81, and mean age of the oldest child was 45.97. Most (72%) participants had at least one child living within 15 minutes travel, and most (72%) saw at least one of their children once a week or more often.

Participants described their children's family and work responsibilities. On the average, participants had at least one child helping relatives other than themselves, at least one child who had children of their own living at home, and at least one child financially supporting his or her own children. Twenty participants reported that one or more of their children had experienced marital disruption within the year preceding the interview. On the average, participants had two children employed outside of the home.

Procedures

Structured interviews were completed in participants' homes. Interview topics were family characteristics (e.g., number of children, children's ages and gender, children's employment status, children's marital status, number and ages of grandchildren), family interaction patterns (e.g., frequency of visits with each child, frequency of mail and telephone contact with each child), family assistance patterns (i.e., frequency of giving 11 types of help to each child within the past year, frequency of receiving 11 types of help from each child within the past year), evaluation of help received (see below), familism values (Cantor, 1976), and demographic background. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 4 hours in length.

Likert scales developed for this project measured satisfaction with practical help (alpha = .67), satisfaction with affective help (alpha = .64), concerns regarding practical help (alpha = .64), and concerns regarding affective help (alpha = .62). In all four measures, participants were presented with statements describing possible evaluations of children's help; the participant was asked the extent to which each statement corresponded to her/his experience.

Scores for satisfaction with practical help and satisfaction with affective support were highly correlated, $r = .58$, $p < .0001$, as were scores for concern regarding practical help and concern regarding affective support, $r = .73$, $p < .0001$. Given the strong associations between evaluations of practical and affective support, the usefulness of examining these evaluations as distinct constructs was dubious. The two satisfaction scales were thus combined for an overall measure of

satisfaction with children's help (14 items, alpha = .73); similarly, the two concern checklists were combined for an overall measure of concern regarding children's help (14 items, alpha = .79).

RESULTS

Concerns regarding help received from adult children are summarized in Table 2. The most frequent concerns referred to unsatisfactory quality of help: approximately one third of the participants reported problems with practical help that did not conform to their wishes or with unwise advice (see Table 2). Other common concerns were feeling that children could not provide sufficient practical or affective support, feeling that children were burdened by listening to worries, feeling that children were strained by helping while meeting work and family responsibilities, and experiencing children's failure to help as expected (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Stepwise multiple regression identified predictors of satisfaction with children's help and concerns regarding children's help. In each analysis, family and participant characteristics were evaluated as predictors. Family characteristics were indicators of children's potential availability as helpers (e.g., proximity; visiting frequency; employment status; assistance to other relatives) and of reciprocity in parent-child exchanges of help. Parent characteristics evaluated as predictors were familism scores, age, sex, and health.

The characteristics significantly predicted satisfaction with children's help, Multiple R = .41, R^2 = .17, F (3, 178) = 12.10, $p <$

.00001; three characteristics were significant predictors. Participants who evaluated their health positively, and who expressed high levels of proximity values and of kin orientation expressed the greatest satisfaction with children's help. Results of this analysis are summarized in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

The characteristics also significantly predicted concerns regarding children's help, Multiple R = .34, R^2 = .11, F (3, 185) = 7.94, $p < .0001$; three characteristics were significant predictors. Parents who expressed high levels of kin obligation, who expressed low levels of kin orientation, and who evaluated their health negatively expressed the greatest concern regarding children's help. Results of this analysis are summarized in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

DISCUSSION

The findings conformed partially to hypotheses. It was hypothesized that, like parents participating in earlier studies of reactions to children's help, these participants would most often report concern about caregiver burden. However, the most frequent concerns referred to the quality of help received from children; participants expressed these concerns approximately twice as often as they mentioned concern over caregiver burden. Participants did worry about burdening their children, but they expressed concern about insufficient help equally often.

Differences between these participants' concerns and those reported in

earlier studies may reflect sample characteristics. These participants were relatively independent: all were community residents, and most reported excellent or good health. Thus, these participants could reasonably assume that their children were not burdened by helping. Furthermore, these participants had the "luxury" of critically evaluating children's help: for most, that help was not essential to maintaining independence. Parents relying more heavily upon children's assistance might express both greater realistic worry that children were burdened and greater reluctance to criticize children's help.

Results of the regression analyses revealed that individual characteristics (e.g., values regarding families, health) provide context for understanding parents' evaluations of children's assistance. Variables not significantly predicting parents' evaluations are also noteworthy. Many family characteristics tested as predictors were indicators of children's competing role demands (e.g., employment status, assisting other relatives); however, none of these indicators were significant predictors.

Children fulfilling multiple roles might be expected to provide less satisfactory assistance; however, this did not seem to be the case. Perhaps children were skillful in juggling role demands; perhaps, too, children allowed performance of other roles to suffer if necessary to provide satisfactory help. It is also possible that parents considered children's role demands in evaluating help. Investigations in which evaluations of children's assistance are examined more comprehensively could help weigh relative merits of these interpretations.

The study findings hold implications for the practitioner. The findings document the need to systematically address "care-recipient burden", just as professionals have responded to the need for interventions ameliorating caregiver burden. Only 74 of the 205 participants reported no concerns regarding children's help: most of these relatively independent elderly parents were aware of problems with help that their children provided. Thus, these parents might welcome interventions designed to enhance their patterns of exchanging help with children.

In further research examining evaluations of children's help, several methodological refinements are recommended. Larger and more representative samples, more sophisticated assessments of parents' evaluations, and both parents' and children's evaluations of the helping situation should be included. These steps should clarify understanding of satisfaction and strain related to intergenerational assistance.

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Table 1

Participants' Demographic and Family Characteristics: Participants in Structured Interviews (N=205)

Mean Age	74.05	(7.48)
Marital Status		
Married	52.2%	
Widowed	42.9%	
Divorced/Separated	4.9%	
Retirement Status		
Retired	85.9%	
Former Occupation		
White Collar/Professional	22.9%	
Clerical	22.9%	
Blue Collar	27.4%	
Service	21.7%	
Agricultural	.6%	
Multiple Jobs	2.9%	
Highest Level of Formal Education		
Less Than High School Degree	36.6%	
High School Degree	24.4%	
Some College/Post-Secondary Education	28.3%	
College Degree	7.8%	
Graduate Degree	3.0%	

Annual Household Income		
Less than $10,000	39.4%	
$10,001 - $20,000	40.9%	
More than $20,001	19.6%	
Self-Rated General Health		
Excellent	19.0%	
Good	54.1%	
Fair	22.4%	
Poor	4.4%	
Mean Number of Children	2.85	(1.52)
Mean Age of Oldest Child	45.97	(8.74)
Mean Age of Youngest Child	41.80	(9.77)
Proximity of Geographically Closest Child		
Within 15 Minute Drive	72.2%	
15 Minute - 1 Hour Drive	11.7%	
More than 1 Hour Drive	16.1%	
Frequency of Visiting Child of Greatest Contact		
Once Per Week Or More Often	71.6%	
Once Per Month Or More Often	17.1%	
Less Often Than Once Per Month	11.3%	
Mean Number Of Children Helping Other Relatives	1.29	(1.46)
Mean Number Of Children Working	2.34	(1.56)

Mean Number Of Children With Children Living At Home	1.75	(1.35)
Mean Number Of Children Financially Supporting Their Own Children	1.84	(1.42)
Any Children Experienced Marital Disruption Within Past Year	10%	

Table 2

Concerns Regarding Help Received From Children

Type of Concern Reported	Percent Reporting
Practical help provided in unsatisfactory manner	35.1%
Unwise advice provided	33.8%
Children burdened by providing practical help	14.7%
Insufficient practical help provided	13.2%
Children burdened by providing affective support	11.7%
Children failed to provide practical help as expected	10.2%
Insufficient affective support provided	9.9%
Children strained by providing practical help while meeting work/family responsibilities	9.8%
Too much practical help provided	8.8%
Children strained by providing affective support while meeting work/family responsibilities	7.3%
Too much affective support provided	6.8%
Children failed to provide affective support as expected	5.4%
Arguments/hard feelings related to practical help	4.4%
Arguments/hard feelings related to affective support	3.9%

Table 3

Significant Predictors Of Satisfaction With Children's Help

Variable	Beta
Self-Rated Health[1]	.250
Proximity Value	.288
Kin Orientation	.201

Note: Each variable contributes significantly to prediction, $p < .004$.

[1]High values indicate positive evaluations

Table 4

Significant Predictors Of Concern Regarding Children's Help

Variable	Beta
Kin Obligation	.199
Kin Orientation	-.195
Self-Rated Health[1]	-.161

Note: Each variable contributes significantly to prediction $p < .021$

[1] High values indicate positive ratings